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Colourful Nabobs

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With the rising of the Empire, 18th century Britain went through significant changes. Politics and economy in tandem with people's mobility led to the emergence of new and faster ways of climbing the social ladder, shaping new social groups with newly acquired needs, that is, with lifestyles quite distinct from the previously known ones. The colonies with their increasing commercial activities and their equally growing administration created innumerable jobs, some of which proved to be very profitable indeed. People from all walks of life, from either the working class or to the aristocracy, tried their luck crossing the Atlantic to start a whole new life. After the loss of the American colonies, it fell on the South Asia dominions, i.e., India, to play the role of the land of opportunity. After the Battle of Plassey (1757) and of Buxar (1764), the East India Company was politically empowered. India was in those days seen as a land of great potential: By either means of legitimate or corrupt business, one could possibly become immensely rich in a short time. These *nouveau-riches*, the so called "nabobs," also adopted many shadings of authoritarianism and ostentation thought to be common among oriental leaders; the nawabs, they were called after. Once back in Great Britain, their manners, or the lack of them, and their display of wealth upset British public opinion some much that, as was to be expected, it resulted on their becoming the object of ridicule and ostracism in periodicals, theatre plays, poems, caricatures… Nevertheless, they actively contributed to structural changes in the meaning and uses of wealth, interfered in politics and inter-class relationships, created more jobs, and were keen on experimenting new methods either in agriculture, building, or industry. This paper, though acknowledging these relevant consequences, aims at highlighting their impact on the sphere of aesthetics. The forms and textures, the motives, and the colors they adopted in their clothing, their jewelry, as well as in their architectural projects brought forth a kind of flamboyant baroque. According to Deleuze's notion of the baroque (*The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, 1993), the assertion that the nabobs unfolded new, more colourful urban and rural landscapes is certainly possible to sustain. Marian Hastings, second wife to Warren Hastings, the first *de facto* Governor-General of India from 1773 to 1785, was considered the epitome of the "nabobina," a feminine nabob. So, the ensuing paper will focus on her description in Eliza Ryves's satirical poem *The Hastiniad*, comparing it with some factual data about Marian Hastings's style, and the Hastings couple's home at Daylesford, Gloucestershire.

Keywords: 18th century Britain, Nabob, Nabobina, baroque

As is well known, 18th century Britain went through significant changes in many quarters as a result of the rising of the Empire. Of course, its genesis goes back to the 16th century, but its actual organization was to occur later, mainly over the last decades of the 17th century and into the next, with the development of most of

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the American colonies. Their increasing agricultural and commercial activities and their equally growing administration also meant the creation of innumerable jobs, of which some proved to be rather profitable. People from all walks of life, either working class or the aristocracy, tried their luck crossing the Atlantic and starting their lives from scratch.

After the loss of the American colonies, the so-called first empire came to an end, and then it fell on the South Asia dominions, i.e., India, to play the role of the land of opportunity. After the Battle of Plassey (1757) and of Buxar (1764), the East India Company[1] ceased to be just a major commercial enterprise, and was politically empowered, both in a local and external capacity and India was then seen as a source of richness. At the same time, politics and the economy, in tandem with people's mobility provided new and faster ways of climbing the social ladder for those who tried their luck in commerce, administration, and the military. Some of these emigrants became wealthy, and in certain cases, lavishly so, and in a short time, to boot by either means of legitimate or corrupt business, shaping new social groups, both in India and in the metropolis, with newly acquired needs, entailing new lifestyles quite distinct from the previously known ones.

These *nouveau-riches*, the so-called nabobs, also adopted many shadings of authoritarianism and ostentation we ascribe to the governors in India under the Mogul empire in the 18th and 19th century, the Hindi *nawabs*, or the Portuguese *nababo*,[2] they were named after (William 1970, 870). They were referred to in terms borrowed from crude assessments of "oriental despots" such as European bashaws, the old word for pasha, a short or corrupted form for padishah (Yule and Burnell 2013, 86). Once back in Great-Britain their manners, or the lack of them, and their display of wealth upset British public opinion bringing about their ostracizing and ridiculing in periodicals, theatre plays, poems, caricatures… The Nabobs' aspiration to gentrification or aristocratization, though carried out in a *gauche*, awkward way, made some contemporaries fear it would become socially contagious. The growing perception of corrupt colonial governance made them also fear that it would soon inflect and infect the British constitution. It seemed a *déjà vue* of the old notion of the East having corrupted the Roman Empire in as much as its ambitious generals, hailing from far off away provinces, snatched the power from the citizens as eastern riches gradually enticed everyone.

Nabocracy was, thus, entangled in social anxieties of the impact of fading class boundaries, emulation, and social aping, as well as of moral and political corruption in society as a whole. All in all, these fears and concerns signal the growing recognition of the significant role nabobs played, or eventually could play in British public affairs.

Mainly, however, nabobs were explicitly associated with bad manners and customs and obscene fortunes. They were serialized in the London press, and consequently the topic reached an enormous readership. In 1772, Lloyd's *Evening Post* began a series of articles concerned with company corruption inspiring the entrepreneur Samuel Foote for his Haymarket hit, *The Nabob*, which was to open in June of the same year. Any attempts at social acceptance were ridiculed in fiction, and Samuel Foote's character, Sir Matthew Mite, accordingly paraded hybrid, deplorable mores before high society: "Damn the smell! It is their (the jonquils') color I talk of. You know my complexion has been tinged by the east and you bring me here a blaze of yellow which gives me the jaundice" (Foote 1984, 95).

Newspapers also reported social animosity towards nabobs throughout the latter part of the 18th century. According to the *Morning Advertiser* May 7, 1792, ladies often refused to dance with them at balls, even at masquerades (Holzman 1928, 19). Tobias Smollett encapsulated the censorious national mood in his *Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, 1771:

> All these absurdities arise from the general tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all, even the very dregs, of the people. Every upstart of fortune, harnessed in the trappings of the mode… clerks and factors from the East Indies, loaded with the spoils of plundered provinces; … men of low birth and no breeding have found themselves suddenly translated into a state of affluence unknown to former ages: and no wonder their brains should be intoxicated with pride, vanity, and presumption. Knowing no other criteria of greatness, but the ostentation of wealth, they discharge their affluence without taste or conduct, through every channel of the most absurd extravagance. (Herbert 1870, 479)

Marian Hastings (née Anna Maria Apollonia Chapusettin), second wife to Warren Hastings, the first *de facto* Governor-General of India from 1773 to 1785, appointed by Prime Minister North (whose government was also the party in charge when the British lost the American colonies), may be considered a fine example of Smollett's social criticism.

In many ways, she represented the epitome of the nabobina, a feminine nabob. She first met Warren Hasting when, in 1768, she and her first husband, the German portrait painter Baron Carl Imhoff sailed in the "Duke of Grafton" to Madras in order to find better living conditions. According to Thomas Macaulay, in his entry "Warren Hastings," the affair started on board and became more serious after she nursed him back to health from a fever (Macaulay 1838, Vol.3). After a brief stay at Hastings' house, the Baron willingly dissolved his marriage to Anna Maria and returned to England with a recently amassed small fortune to the amount of 10,000£. The color of money spoke loud in these marital arrangements. Warren and Marian, as Hastings preferred to call her, stayed at Madras until 1772, when he was appointed Governor-General of Calcutta, and, the divorce finally concluded, they made legal their union, allowing her to take her first step into her nabobina status.

Although originating in a scandalous situation, Warren and Marian soon became the leading characters of Calcutta's social, and by extension, British India's limelight. Again according to Macaulay, she was prepared to "play the part of a queen under the Tropic of Cancer," and "had an agreeable person, a cultivated mind, and manners in the highest degree engaging" (Macaulay 1838, Vol.3). Their contempt for the will of the Court of Directors and their employers at the headquarters of the Company became evident, when, after the fall of Fox's government, Pitt made no mention of Hastings on introducing a new India Act in 1784. This was indeed seen as a sign of the unwillingness of the government to support the Governor General. Public outrage had galvanized around the famine of 1769-1970, in which over 10 million Bengalis died of starvation, and thus the alleged despotic rule of the Governor-General wound up putting the Company under scrutiny. In fact, it was eventually accused of the economic exploitation of India through its trading monopoly, depredations and annexations through the force of arms.

Briefly, the mid-1780s witnessed a rising tide of hostility towards Hastings' administration in Bengal as reported back in London, often from members who opposed him on the Supreme Council. Burke through his alliance with Hastings' arch-rival Philip Francis became his most celebrated accuser, preoccupied with what he saw as a corrupt British empire.[3] Hastings' trial, from 1788 to 1795, failed to impeach him, but seriously dilapidated the couple's huge fortune, as well as their own-built pedestal. The acrimony is patent in Timothy Touchstone's (Gentleman) *Tea and Sugar; or, the Nabob and the Creole* (1792):

> Thus Britons, are procur'd the Eastern wares,
> Your Iv'ry Cabinets, and your Iv'ry Chairs;
> Your Silks, your costly Gems, and baneful TEA,
> Pernicious DRUG!—to health an enemy!
> Which for to gain, thousands of Indians bleed,

> And base Corruption's ready-growing seed,
> Is largely strewn, o'er Britain's famous land,
> By an unprincipled, a savage band. (in Greene, 2013, 355)

However, when in 1784 Marian sailed back to England, Hastings had commissioned Johann Zoffany a portrait to capture a moment of bliss and grandeur in their Garden at Alipore circa 1784-1787.[4] Unlike the classical portrait with Marian holding her child, previously painted by William Dickinson when she was still Baroness von Imhoff[5] (published by Carrington Bowles, Printseller after Robert Edge Pine mezzotint, published 1770[6]), this intimate conversation piece is tinged with sadness, as Hasting's beloved wife was soon to leave for Europe. The peaceful, melancholic landscape hints, however, at the huge property owned by the Hastings, and the uncommon affectionate gesture of the couple holding hands does not diminish the centrality of Marian's golden robe. Nothing like the exuberant portrait that stayed in Calcutta, of Marian wearing a green gown holding a book with one hand and stretching up the other arm in a languor, sensuous gesture, while looking at the window, a picture kept at the Victorian Memorial Museum in Calcutta.

Even deprived of the possibility of appreciating her queenly portrait, her arrival in London is fully depicted in the lines of Ryves' mock-heroic poem, *The Hastiniad*, published in 1785:

> A Heroine hastes from Indian climes,
> Like Dido, when her wealth she bore,
> To find a throne on Africk's shore.
> It's Hastings! High in princely state;
> Hastings preemently great;
> Who sweeps along the wat'ry plain,
> With half an empire in her train. (Ryves 1785, 7, X-XI)

Marian's colorful and shining appearance is further highlighted by the titles the author attributes to her—"Dido," "queen," "Sultana," associating her with images of the sun and classical mythology: a gilded chariot now receives/The great Sultana from the waves (Ryves 1785, 8, XV). She is Apollo the god who drives the sun's chariot, and Venus, the goddess of beauty and love, rising from the water, simultaneously.

She also carried regal presents to queen Charlotte: "Oppressed with gifts in triumph spread/The chairs of state, the ivory bed" (Ryves 1785, 8, XVI).

The emphasis on golden fabrics to stress the almost royal quality of the owner and bearer is obvious in her robes and jewelry: as an anonymous contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine* noted, Marian Hastings "wore diamonds and jewels enough to merit celestial comparison" (Nechtman 2010, 192). Even the curtains of her chariot were "netted in gold" (Ryves 1785, 9, XVIII). *The Rolliad*, another contemporaneous satirical poem but with several political and social targets, also dedicates some lines to the outstanding nabobina: Translation of a Persian Inscription engraven on a large line Ruby being the titles either given to or assumed by Mrs. HASTINGS.

> Royal and Imperial Governess,
> The elegance of the age,
> The most exalted Bilkiss,
> The Zobaide of the Palaces,[7]
> The most heroic Princess,
> Ruby Marian Hastings, Sauby, &c. Sec. (48)
> Gods! How her diamonds flock,

On each unpowdered lock!
For sniff-rich odours scent the sphere![8]
Tis Mrs Hastings' self brings up the rear!
On every membrane see a topaz clings!
Behold! Her joints are fewer than her rings. (Tickell 1795, 325-6)

In 1788, Warren Hastings returned to England to answer before Parliament for professional misconduct. This was also the year he purchased Daylesford, a freehold estate encompassing a manor and over 600 acres of land. He paid for it £11,434, a not insignificant amount, considering his fortune was only £75,000, the majority of which he stood to lose, were he to be found guilty of the charges brought against him. In addition to the mansion, the estate included the village and church of Daylesford, several farms, a timbered park, lakes, pleasure gardens, and "an orangery heated with hot water pipes," the latter building suggesting that the Hastings missed the gardens of Bengal. From his correspondence, we also know that he asked his agents in India to send him lychee, cinnamon, and custard apple seeds, as well as Arab horses and shawl goats, so that he could recreate the exotic Arcadia the couple missed in England[9] (Lenckos, *Daylesford*).

Samuel Pepys Cockerell built the mansion at the exorbitant cost of £25,000. It had a "Mughal-style" dome whose interior painted by Hastings evoked the skies over Bengal. The Hastings were among the first collectors of Mughal drawings and art objects. They filled their English house with Indian treasures—ivories, silks, silver filigree ornaments, set of jewels with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, Persian weaponry, for instance. They also organized an extensive library on Indian subjects (including the first translations of the Bhagavad-Gita and The Hedaya) (Lenckos, Daylesford).

Curiously, at the Daylesford mansion these "Oriental" *objects d'art* entered in a kind of dialectical relationship with elements of Western art, such as the fireplace by Thomas Banks in which the lines of its classical structure are to be traced together with the semi-columns or caryatids of Indian inspiration, the scenes of Calcutta by William Hodges, who worked under Hastings patronage, and, of course, the portraits of Johan Zoffany. It was the home of true *connoisseur*s, who knew and loved India better than their detractors credited them for.

Although Marian Hastings returned from India as a woman of means, her lavish oriental taste, which took nabobi stereotypes to extremes, together with the couple's expenditures and propensity to speculate on the financial market took their toll, and they were eventually forced to live modestly among the magnificent scenario they had created for themselves at Daylesford (Lenckos, Daylesford).

Notwithstanding the stream of reproaches, they were aimed at on account of their social *faux-pas* or corrupt behavior, their consumerism, their easy and fast spending habits with somewhat gloomy consequences were sometimes offensive to most of the thriving metropolitan British people. On the other hand, their wish to become landowners and mansion owners, as an acknowledged means to acquire higher status, seems quite traditional when compared with their willingness to speculate at the Stock Exchange with the new capitalist tools. Nevertheless, they were instrumental in the creation of more jobs, and they also made experiments with agriculture, stimulated building, etc.

The nabobs' eagerness to live at an upper level, though a bit naïve, actually contributed to structural changes in the use and circulation of wealth. The "Indian Loot," as Burke classified Hastings' manoeuvres, also interfered in politics, in some cases bribing MPs, so they might keep their positions and business in South Asia. Belonging to no specific social stratum, they tried to forge inter-class relationships, giving rise to a new

generation with a new attitude towards the empire and their place at home.

Dr. Johnson was well aware of the equivocal standards his contemporaries were living by. So, he presents a more mundane perspective highlighting the crossing lines between morality and prosperity, or between Cato and Julius Caesar, as previously illustrated by Addison in 1712:

> I regretted the decay of respect for men of family, and that now a Nabob would carry an election from them. Johnson: "Why, sir, the Nabob will carry it by means of his wealth in a country where money is highly valued, as it must be where nothing can be had without money; but if it comes to personal preference, the man of family will always carry it." (Hill 1796, 120)

Nabobcracy's supposed depravity, however, was believed to infringe not only on social hierarchy and parliamentary life, but also on the realm of art and aesthetics. Aesthetically, the 18th century in Europe was divided between classicism and the baroque; sometimes the latter lingered on, and reinvented itself as the rococo. Nietzsche considered that "the baroque style always arises at the time of decay of a great art, when the demands of art in classical expression have become too great" (*Human All-Too-Human*). He further explains:

> To this style belongs, firstly, a choice of material and subjects of the highest dramatic tension, at which the heart trembles even when there is no art, because heaven and hell are all too near the emotions: then, the oratory of strong passion and gestures, of ugly sublimity, of great masses, in fact of absolute quantity per se… (Nietzsche 1911)

Curiously, the Spanish Eugenio d'Ors, in his essay *Lo Barroco* (1935), contrasts classicism to baroque and considers them two equivalent inspirations: The former is defined by its economy and reason; the latter by music and abundance. The former prefers stable and heavy forms, the latter flying spirals (d'Ors 1935, 82). The nabobs' and nabobini's actions and preferences seem to meet Eugenio d'Ors's vision, filling the emotional gap their lives had suffered from in both their material fulfillment and their sensibility. Marian Hastings, because she was a woman, i.e., a sensible human being according to the gender ideology of the times, somehow constituted the perfect vehicle to convey this new way of understanding and embracing life as a whole, that is: abundance of color and of artistic objects surrounding you, presenting herself in the fashion of times as a goddess of Greek or Roman mythology, but with Oriental ornaments, thus, making the apology of wealth and beauty as two inseparable parts of the human equation. Her blazing description in Ryves's poem, albeit satiric, corresponds to d'Ors's definition of baroque as passion and excess.

So, the forms and textures adopted by the nabobs in their houses, furniture, decoration, or clothing, with exotic motives, the explosion of color and the shining jewelry, brought about perhaps a late baroque, or even a mock-baroque in the eyes of their detractors, or, in a more positive approach, a kind of flamboyant baroque, marked by the exuberant green, orange, red, and golden colors, thus exhibiting other possibilities of decoding and depicting our world. In fact, it emerges not necessarily as a sign of decadence, as Nietzsche viewed it, nor in opposition to the aristocratic classicism, as d'Ors thinks, but as a different perspective of beauty and its *praxis* in everyday life. According to Deleuze,

> The Baroque does not refer to an essence, but rather to an operative function, to a characteristic. It endlessly creates folds. It does not invent the thing: There are all the folds that come from the Orient—Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, classical folds… But it twists and turns the folds, takes them to infinity, fold upon fold, fold after fold. The characteristic of the Baroque is the fold that goes on to infinity. And from the beginning, it differentiates them along two lines, according to two infinities, as if the infinite had two levels: the coils of matter, and the folds in the soul. Below, matter is amassed according to an initial type of fold, then organized according to a second type, insofar as its parts constitute organs "differently folded and more or less developed." (Deleuze 1993, 227)

The reinvention of urban life and the rural landscape performed by nabobs like the Hastings, their building of the Daylesford mansion, with its external and interior decorations constitutes a good example of Deleuze's notion of the material fold and the ideal one, insofar as they recreated the natural environment, and ordered their ornaments in an original and multi-stylish perspective, their own and, thus subjective, because, as Deleuze explains, there is a variety of modalities of folds, and subjectivity might be understood as precisely a topology of these different kinds of folds (Deleuze 1993).

This world is one amongst many "possible worlds" each as different as the beings "expressing" them, and the new aesthetics, enmeshing metropolitan references, the immanent aesthetics, with an alien culture's modes of expression unfolded ways of representing oneself both as individuals, and in political capacity as yet unknown.

Nabobs and nabobini alike grasped the moment of hesitation and contemplation of these two aesthetic approaches, and opted for the joining of art and life. They collected and appreciated, developed a connoisseur's eye in order to embrace the approaching fold. This is the case with Hastings himself with his likeness portrayed in Augustan style in Thomas Banks's bronze bust (1794)[10] (National Portrait Gallery), in clear classical fashion, as he is also symbolically represented in the shape of a bull conveying the idea of power and creative force, without the symbolically represented by the bull, without the coronet in his armorial.[11]

Notes

1. A company formed for the exploitation of trade with East and Southeast Asia and India, incorporated by royal charter on December 31, 1600. Formerly it was known as "Governor and Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies" (1600-1708), or "United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies" (1708-1873).

2. The Portuguese presence in India dated from 1498, when Vasco da Gama discovered the Atlantic route from Portugal to India.

3. Marshall, *The Trial of Warren Hastings*, Oxford, 1965.

4. Oil on canvas (C1311). Warren Hastings, Governor General of Bengal 1774-1785, commissioned Zoffany to prepare several portraits. https://www.google.pt/search?q=Marian+Hastings+by+Zoffany&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjzpXt3a_MAhVCaRQKHV7EAL0QsAQIGw&biw=1025&bih=476#imgrc=BydalFIeGXsX1M%3A>.

5. <https://www.google.pt/search?q=Marian+Hastings+by+Dickinson&biw=1025&bih=476&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjnzKSs3q_MAhVLuhQKHbE9CU8Q_AUIBigB#imgrc=2VfF-4rHS53c9M%3A>.

6. Dickinson was an engraver. In 1773, he began publishing his own prints. By 1778, he entered into partnership with the engraver Thomas Watson, took over the print shop of Walter Shropshire in New Bond Street, where they had a stock of plates based on modern artists including Reynolds. After Watson's death in 1781, he continued with the business, and in 1791, he was appointed engraver to the Prince of Wales. Published by Carington Bowles, Printseller after Robert Edge Pine mezzotint, published 1770. Pine was a portrait and historical painter; he exhibited at the Society of Artists (1760-1771), and at the Free Society of Artists (1761-1763). During the 1760s, he was one of the leading portrait painters in London; his sitters included George II, the Duke of Northumberland and David Garrick. In around 1784, he moved to America, Philadelphia, where he built a flourishing portrait practice, with George Washington his most eminent American sitter.

7. Bilkiss, i.e., the queen of Sheba; Zobaide, one of Mahomed's favorite spouses.

8. A new interjection fur the sense of smelling.

9 . On Daylesford estate cf. Lenckos, Elizabeth. *Daylesford Case Study*. 014. http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/daylesford-case-study/; On Hastings' financial status, see P.J. Marshall, "The Personal Fortune of Warren Hastings in Retirement," *The Economic History Review* 17 (1964): 299.

10. <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02983/Warren-Hastings?search=ap&subj=429%3BSculpture&displayNo=40&wPage=3&rNo=146>.

11. <http://carltonhobbs.co.uk/tag/warren-hastings/>.

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